DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 480 963 CE 085 516

AUTHOR	Siegel, Irwin H.
TITLE	From Symbols, Stories and Social Artifacts to Social Architecture and Agency: The Discourse of Learning and the Decline of "Organizational Culture" in the "New Work Order".
PUB DATE	2001-06-00
NOTE	9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Adult Education Research Conference (42nd, Lansing, MI, June 1-3, 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.edst.educ.ubc.ca/aerc/2001/2001siegel.htm.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Administrative Organization; Adult Education; Behavior Standards; Context Effect; Discourse Communities; Educational Anthropology; *Educational Environment; *Employer Employee Relationship; Incidental Learning; Independent Study; Informal Education; Models; Nonformal Education; *Norms; *Organizational Change; *Organizational Climate; *Organizational Culture; Social Control; Theory Practice Relationship; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS	Learning Organizations; Organizational Learning

ABSTRACT

The concept of organizational culture has been central to the development of concepts, such as the learning organization and organizational learning, which are important within the field of adult education. However, the functionalist models of organizational culture, which have often relied on ethnographic and/or anecdotal studies of organizations in an attempt to discern the "culture" of an organization, do not appropriately account for individual learning and agency. Functionalist models result in descriptions of the "universal" culture of organizations and prescriptive lists of findings that link cultures to productivity and profitability. They de-emphasize individual learning and agency and often result in culture being used as a tool by managers for normative control. According to a critical model of organizational culture, though, an organization will maximize productivity and profitability when workers learn their cultures through informal and incidental learning that counter the norming attributes found within the institutional components of social architecture. An alternate model of "social architecture," functioning within the "new work order," reduces dependence on the discourse of social anthropology and provides recognition of individual agency and critical reflection to combat normative control while not divorcing the individual from his or her social and cultural context. (Contains 16 references.) (MO)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 480 963

From Symbols, Stories and Social Artifacts to Social Architecture and Agency: The Discourse of Learning and the Decline of "Organizational Culture" in the "New Work Order"

Irwin H. Siegel

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

I. Siegel

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CE085516

From Symbols, Stories and Social Artifacts to Social Architecture and Agency: The Discourse of Learning and the Decline of "Organizational Culture" in the "New Work Order"

Irwin H. Siegel
Pennsylvania College of Technology/Penn State University, USA

Abstract: The functionalist models of organizational culture, which have often relied on ethnographic and/or anecdotal studies of organizations in an attempt to discern the "culture" or an organization, do not appropriately account for individual learning and agency. This paper suggests an alternative model of "social architecture" comprised of "institutional" and "agency" components.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal of attention has been focused in the management, organizational theory and workplace learning literature over the past thirty years on the importance of the concept of "organizational culture" in understanding the nature and, more particularly, the productivity of organizations. The concept of organizational culture has been central to development of other concepts such as the learning organization and organizational learning, which have become increasingly important within the field of adult education (Marsick and Watkins, 1990; Fenwick, 1996).

Researchers in organizational culture such as Schein (1992) have sought to utilize terminology borrowed from anthropology and other social sciences in defining the "culture" or an organization as (a) a pattern of basic assumptions, (b) invented, discovered, or developed by a given group, (c) as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, (d) that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore (e) is to be taught to new members as the (f) correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems (Schein, 1999b, p. 80).

In addition to Schein, other researchers (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1988; Kotter and Heskett, 1992), applying definitions not dissimilar to that set forth above, have conducted primarily "ethnographic" studies of organizations, applying these borrowed concepts, in an attempt to discern the "culture" of an organization, which is then juxtaposed against measures of the organization's productivity and/or profitability. Generalizations regarding optimum productivity/profitability resulting from certain types of "organizational culture" are often the byproduct of these studies.

Gee, Hull and Lankabeau (1996) term these often commercially successful texts "fast capitalist" texts, which they define as "creat[ing] on paper a version of the new work order that their authors are trying hard to enact in the world...a mix of history and description, prophecy, warning, proscriptions and recommendations, parables...and large doses of utopianism" (p. 24-25). [The "new work order" has been defined as "the dynamic and human nature of post-industrial work...post-Fordism: (Solomon, 1999, p. 121)]. Interestingly, Schein (1999a) himself recently vented his "anger...and frustration" (p. xiii) over what he views as the "faddish" (Spector, 2000) nature of many recent works addressing the concept of "organizational culture." The irony is that Schein (1999a) expressed these emotions as the result of what he perceived as the dilution of the concept of "organizational culture," arguing, in essence, that the term is becoming hackneyed and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

a cliché. However, the issues are more serious. This paper argues that the notion of "organizational culture" itself is actually theoretically problematic. It also suggests an alternative: a model of "social architecture" which contains "institutional" and "agency" components. The latter are especially significant to the field of adult education because they emphasize the *learning* aspect of "culture" but in a non-proscriptive manner, which is contrary to, and not consistent with, shaping the norms of others, a concept often evident in the "fast capitalist" models, most of which fall into a "functionalist" (Parker, 2000) classification.

Contrasting Models of Organizational Culture

Functionalist Models

Parker (2000) describes the functionalist models of organizational culture as "seek[ing] to discover data about organizations in order than an elite, usually managers, can better exercise control" (p. 61). Functionalist models, of which Schein (1992) is a prime producer, attempt to discern the "culture" of an organization, often through the use of ethnographic methods and anthropological terminology. The inevitable result is a description of the "universal" culture of the organization, and a prescriptive list of "findings" which link that culture to productivity, profitability or the lack of same. In addition to the works of Schein, the most popular functionalist books have included Peters and Waterman's (1982) *In search of excellence*, arguably "the most influential management text of recent times" (Parker, 2000, p. 10), which purports to be a study of 43 high-performing U.S. companies, and which synthesizes what the authors feel are the universal cultural qualities shared by all. The anecdotal descriptions provided in the book often link positive culture to the Japanese model prevalent at the time. The "excellent" companies "were actually repositories of myths, symbols, stories and legends that reflected and reinforced the central (and positive) values of the organization…"(Parker, 2000, p. 11). The result was eight prescriptive rules or "maxims" for success linked to maintenance of a "strong" culture.

In addition to Peters and Waterman, the functionalist organizational culture literature includes Deal and Kennedy's (1988) *Corporate cultures*, which, again, focuses on a series of companies which the authors determine possess "strong" cultures. Not surprising within the context of its publication, this book depends heavily upon the Japanese models prevalent at the time: "A major reason the Japanese have been so successful…is their continuing ability to maintain a very strong and cohesive culture throughout the entire country" (p. 5). The authors go on to define the essential elements of organizational culture, which include the venerable values, heroes, rites and rituals, and a network for "storytellers, spies, priests, cabals, and whisperers…"(p. 15).

Smircich's (1983) suggestion that we treat organizations *as* cultures rather than *things with* culture provides the strongest caution for liberal applications of the functionalist models. Their de-emphasis of individual learning and agency, and resulting focus on the power and importance of shared meanings, can often result in culture being used as a tool for by managers for normative control (Kunda, 1992).

Even a functionalist such as Schein (1999a) recently expressed his frustration at the "faddish nature" (Spector, 2000, p. 1) in which "organizational culture" currently finds itself, largely the result of the "fast capitalist" texts. Schein (1999a) lamented that "we talk about corporate culture as if it were a managerial tool, like a new form of organization structure" (p. xiv). Ironically, his lament is contained in his latest book

entitled *The corporate culture survival guide: Sense and nonsense about culture change* (1999), yet another "fast capitalist" text. He appears not to recognize that the functionalist models of organizational culture are commercially successful because of their suggestion of organizational culture as a *manipulative* tool for management (Kunda, 1992). Witness this passage from Kunda's (1992) "Tech" (the fictitious name Kunda selected for the organization he studied):

> She is an engineer who is now 'totally into culture.' Over the last few years she has become the resident 'culture expert.' 'I got burnt out on coding. You can only do so much. And I knew my limits. So I took a management job and I'm funded to do culture now. Some people didn't believe it had any value-added. But I went off and made it happen, and now my workshops are all over-subscribed! I'm a living example of the culture…Today I'm doing culture with the new hires…(p.6).

Doing culture? A fundamental weakness of the functionalist models is that they have taken culture from its original role as a *context* for understanding organizational behavior to a *broad descriptor* for an organization to a *process*, which often becomes a process for normative control (Kunda, 1992) by management.

Critical Models

The critical models of organizational culture (or "radical humanism," Parker, 2000), on the other hand, "…conceptualize…organizational culture as a contested relation between meanings…" (Parker, 2000, p. 74). These models de-emphasize the focus on a universal "culture" within an organization, substituting a focus upon *subcultures*, where "social groups are not homogenous, but often plural and contested" (Parker, 2000, p. 75). There exists, according to this model, a multiplicity of cultures within organizations. To posit that IBM, for example, possesses a universal "culture" is to minimize the localized cultures, whether *administrative* (created by management) or *occupational* (created by employees). My position is that "universal" cultures seldom develop (bottom up) within organizations of any size. Rather, senior management, with the assistance of "fast capitalist" consultants, can attempt to impose (top down) such "cultures" as a form of normative control: "the creation and maintenance in the organization of 'core values' and a culture that induces (socializes) everyone into such values" (Gee, et al., 1996, p. 32).

The "Tech" employees described by Kunda (1992) attempted to resist normative control by attempting to create what Feldman (1999) terms a "self-society" dichotomy in which they distinguish their "true" selves from their "organization" selves (p.4). This creates a "boundary," permitting them to critically reflect upon the normative control being forced upon them. For example, the term "bullshit" frequently is used by employees at "Tech" to describe the "knowledge" seminars (Kunda, 1992):

> People get caught up in this shit. It is not only the power. Maybe the growth. The times I want to leave are when there are too many things happening that are out of control. I can't take too much bullshit even though I'm paid to be an asshole (p. 165)

Learning and Agency

Moore (1986) suggests that, "the central *educational* question in the workplace is not whether rich forms of knowledge are in use in the environment, but rather whether and how newcomers…get *access* to that knowledge: how they encounter it, take it in, are

called upon to display it, get to work on it and even transform it" (p. 183). Because of the denotations and connotations in the discourse of social anthropology of the term "culture," the component of *agency* seldom appears in functionalist organizational culture models. However, especially in the "new work order," the critical reflection, informal and incidental learning (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), and values of the individual will become increasingly crucial to avoid the potential dystopia resulting from normative control. Solomon (1999) instructs us that "Workplace learning can be understood as a cultural practice constructed by contemporary discursive practices of work" (p. 122). Rather than "the learning organization" paradigm of the functionalist models, where "workplace learning" can result in "a repressive exercise of power" (p. 124), a critical model of organizational culture should value *learning*, not as "assum[ing] that the world can be managed" (Schein, 1992, p. 372), but rather " the way in which individuals or groups acquire, interpret, reorganize, change or assimilate a related cluster of information, skills and feelings. It is also primary to the way in which people construct meaning in their personal and shared organizational lives" (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p. 4).

Real learning in the workplace is not "top down," imposed via normative control; rather, it is "bottom up." "We believe that people learn in the workplace through interactions with others in their daily work environments when the need to learn is greatest" (Marsick and Watkins, 1990, p. 4). Contrary to the "fast capitalist" literature, an organization will maximize productivity and profitability when workers learn their *cultures* via primarily informal and incidental learning (Marsick and Watkins, 1990), not "learning the organizational culture" through formal methods which often are nothing more than a tool of management for achieving normative control.

Replacing "Organizational Culture" With a Model of "Social Architecture

Jack Welch, the recently retired CEO of General Electric Co., on occasion utilized a term which appears appropriate to a discussion of organizational culture for the "new work order." He termed it "social architecture," which, along with "operating system" comprise "sophisticated unifying structures, developed over decades and heavily refined by Mr. Welch that it [GE] says are larger than any one person" (Murray, 2000, p. A1). The term *social architecture* would appear to be appropriate to understanding all of the components of what has been termed organizational culture. Over twenty years ago, Kotter (1978), in providing a model of organizational dynamics, defined a "social system" as comprised of "culture" ("those organizationally relevant norms and values shared by most employees (or subgroups of employees")) and "social structure" ("the relationships that exist among employees in terms of such variables as power, affiliation and trust"). (p. 17).

A focus of this paper has been on deconstructing the traditional models of organizational culture, attempting to assist Schein (1999a) in discovering the source of his anger and frustration. Schein (1999a) however is correct in that culture is complex and that it does "matter," although in much more than a performance sense. Perhaps a refined model of the components of "social architecture," which is defined here to include *institutional components* and *agency* (substituting for the anthropologically-grounded "organizational culture") would be helpful to understanding this concept as it

applies in the "new work order." The components of this "social architecture" model follow below:

Institutional Components		***Agency Components***
Interaction with others	Occupational Cultures	
Leadership Influence		Critical reflection
Norms		Power/knowledge issue recognition
Traditions		Critical Evaluation
Organizational Values		Individual Values
Organizational Learning		Individual Learning
Administrative Cultures		Motivation
Power/knowledge structures		Autonomy
Politics		
Climate		

The above model more appropriately (a) reduces dependence on the discourse of social anthropology; and (b) provides recognition of the importance of individual agency and critical reflection to combat "normative control" while not divorcing the individual employee from his/her social/cultural context. Awareness by individual employees of the power/knowledge dichotomy may serve in some manner to combat the power/knowledge structures inherent in the "new work order's" striving for increased efficiency. In short, this suggested model does not devalue the need for efficiency; rather, it serves to enhance efficiency by recognizing the impact of the institutional components and importance of agency, suggesting a synergistic relationship to the mutual advantage of the organization and the individual. The model addresses many of the weaknesses of the traditional organizational culture models discussed at length above. It suggests that the political system is part of the cultural system, and that there exists a role for norms, so long as they are counter-balanced by an individual's ability to learn and critically reflect. The model is probably unique in including "motivation" as entirely a component of agency, reflecting a belief in its wholly intrinsic nature. Lending credence to one aspect of the functional organizational culture models, this model does recognize leadership influence as an institutional component of social architecture, again being counterbalanced by critical reflection. Note also that "occupational cultures" is placed in the "gray" area between the institutional and agency components. The model addresses the complexity of an organization's social architecture, and, persumably, the anger and frustration of one of the major organizational culture theorists over the dilution and "faddishness" of that concept, changing the focus of, rather than eliminating the need for, organizational consultants, while, hopefully, blunting the advance of the "fast capitalist" texts suggesting how to "manage" culture.

Conclusion

Although Edgar Schein was frustrated and angry, his solution, The corporate culture survival guide (1999) amounted to yet another corporate-culture-as-process, "fast capitalist" work. It fails to provide solutions to the most significant problems: defining the "institutional components" and the role of "agency" made evident within the "new work order" and recognizing that "social architecture" is only one of a multitude of components of production. The learning required in by agency is an essential ingredient of the model of social architecture, as it will often result in the critical reflection needed to counter the norming attributes found within the institutional components of social architecture.

References

Deal, T. & Kennedy, A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.

Fenwick, T. (1996). Limits of the learning organization: A critical look. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 401 395).

Gee, J., Hull, G. & Lankabeau, C. (1996) *The new work order*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Kotter, J. (1978). *Organizational dynamics: Diagnosis and intervention.* Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Kunda, G. (1992). *Engineering culture: Control and commitment in a high-tech corporation*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Marsick, V. & Watkins, K. (1990). *Informal and incidental learning in the workplace*. London: Routledge.

Murray, M. (2000, April 13). Can house that Jack build stand when he goes? Sure, Welch says. *The Wall Street Journal*, pp. A1, A8.

Moore, D. (1986). Learning at work: Case studies in non-school education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 17(3), 166-184.

Parker, M. (2000). *Organizational culture and identity*. London: Sage Publications.

Peters, T. & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies.* New York: Harper & Row.

Schein, E. (1999a). *The corporate culture survival guide: Sense and nonsense about culture change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Schein, E. (1999b). Organizational culture. Reprinted in Ancona, D., Kochan, S, & Van Maanen, W. (1999). *Organizational behavior & processes*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College Publishing, 76-92.

Schein, E. (1992). *Organizational culture and leadership* (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Smircich, L. (1983). Studying organizations as cultures, In Morgan, G. (Ed.) *Beyond method*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 160-172.

Solomon, N. (1999). Culture and difference in workplace learning. In David Boud and John Garrick, Eds., *Understanding learning at work*. London: Routledge, pp. 119-131.

Spector, B. (2000). [Review of the book *The corporate culture survival guide: Sense and nonsense about culture change.*] *The Academy of Management Executive, 14*(1), 156-157. [Online], Available: proquest.umi.com.pqdweb?TS=9556349 [April 13, 2000].

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

REPRODUCTION RELEASE

(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title:	From Symbols, Stories and Social Artifacts to Social Architecture and Individual Agency: The Discourse of Learning and the Decline of "Organizational Culture" in the "New Work Order"
Author(s):	Irwin H. Siegel
Corporate Source:	Publication Date: May, 2001

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Level 1

☒

Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) and paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2A

Level 2A

☐

Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Sample

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

2B

Level 2B

☐

Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Sign here, → please

Signature: I. H. Siegel	Printed Name/Position/Title: Associate Prof, Business Admin.
Organization/Address: Pennsylvania College of Technology	Telephone: (570) 326-3761 FAX: (570) 327-4529
	E-Mail Address: isiegel@pct.edu Date: 3/12/03

(over)